

# Chapter 18

## Virtual Identities from Virtual Environments

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### ABSTRACT

*The creation of identities in immersive online digital environments has become commonplace in consumer behavior. Consumers frequently enter into socially networked, computer mediated environments (CME's) as avatars. A user can design his or her avatar by choosing typologies of facial features, body types and clothing styles. The chapter concerns Avatar analysis as a system for generating and analyzing consumer information of practical value to marketers. Avatar analysis enhances understanding of brand perceptions and meanings, discovers new ways of positioning and differentiating brands, and provides insights for improving the effectiveness of brand communications. Using websites such as Second Life to draw avatars, consumer identity projections are elicited based on consumers' perceptions and interpretations of their own digital figure drawings i.e., virtual social identities of consumers and brands. These identity projections disclose their real and ideal selves, brand-as-a-person, and imagery of a typical brand user.*

### AVATARS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILES

Avatars serve to mirror their creator's self-identity and serve as a medium for self-disclosure. Self-identity may be defined as the unique character of one's self, as distinguished from others. Forms by which self-identity is disclosed may be either realistic or imaginary. Self-disclosure of one's

identity may relate to a hobby, opinion, capability, or personal attractiveness. Self-disclosure is relatively consistent regardless of the form in which self-identity is presented (Kang and Yang, 2006). Self-identity as portrayed by an avatar may consciously reference the actual self, the ideal self, or an unconscious self-image. Gender and age affect the style and focus given to self-identity disclosure. Females are prone to express imaginary identities when they are unfamiliar with parties viewing their avatars. Age affects self-disclosure

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i.e., people in their 20's and 30's in discussing their avatars are more likely to disclose opinions about such matters as public affairs issues.

A study by Vasalou et al (2008) provides rich insights for the interpretation of person and lifestyle profiles. Avatars show how a face is personalized, linking special facial features and hair color and styling to the physical identity. Personality, taste and object cathexis are represented by fashion expressions e.g., individual clothes, taste in coordinating clothing outfits, special signature items displayed on the person. Avatars are a means of understanding a subject's values including group affiliations, accepted cultural norms, emotional attachments, and response to environmental experiences.

## **AVATARS AND CONSUMER INSIGHTS**

Perceptions of Avatars' traits have been studied under conditions of experimental manipulation. Nowak and Rauh (2006) used a static context for presentation of digitally created, experimenter-produced, avatars to which participants responded. Participants' perceptions of anthropomorphism, androgyny, credibility, homophily, attraction and likelihood of choice for interaction were obtained in response to experimental avatars to which they were exposed. Participants were found to choose perceived attractive and credible avatars to represent themselves. They voiced a preference for avatars that matched their own gender and regarded female avatars as more attractive than male avatars.

Avatars have also been used for applications in clinical psychology. Clinical applications include using avatars to diagnose and treat phobias, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sexual disorders, and neurological damage. In a framework for future research in the area (Gaggioli, Mantovani, Castelnuovo, Wieberhold, and Riva, 2003), three levels of analysis involving avatars have been identified: (1) identification of salient physical

features, (2) simulation of the virtual human's behavioral realism, and (3) relational or interactional potentialities.

The fields of consumer marketing and buyer behavior have increasingly

focused on avatars. This is evidenced by recent research into the influence of virtual identities for online shopping, the impact of avatars as online customer service representatives, and even as virtual human branded product introductions available on the web. Avatars have been found to serve as effective online sales agents generating higher levels of retailer satisfaction, more positive product attitudes and stronger purchase intentions. Characteristics mediating these effects include perceptions of the avatar's attractiveness and expertise, as these interact with levels of product involvement (Holzwarth, Janiszewski and Neuman, 2006).

In one study, it was found that animated avatars do not heighten consumer trust of a product. However, the authors recommend that future studies present avatars with increased vividness, facial expressions and better synchronization with online marketing communications (Qiu and Benbasat, 2005). Intention to use avatar-related products was successfully predicted in another study (Chung, 2005). Ease of use of the avatar, its perceived usefulness, and attitudes toward the avatar were key determinants of the intention to use the avatar-related product.

## **SELF-CONGRUITY AND VIRTUAL IDENTITIES**

Covering a broad spectrum of approaches to self-congruity avatar analysis is expected to become fertile ground for future work in psychological aspects of consumption. The present work, discussed in this chapter, is interdisciplinary and has profound implications not only for marketers and marketing academicians, but also for economists and psychologists.

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